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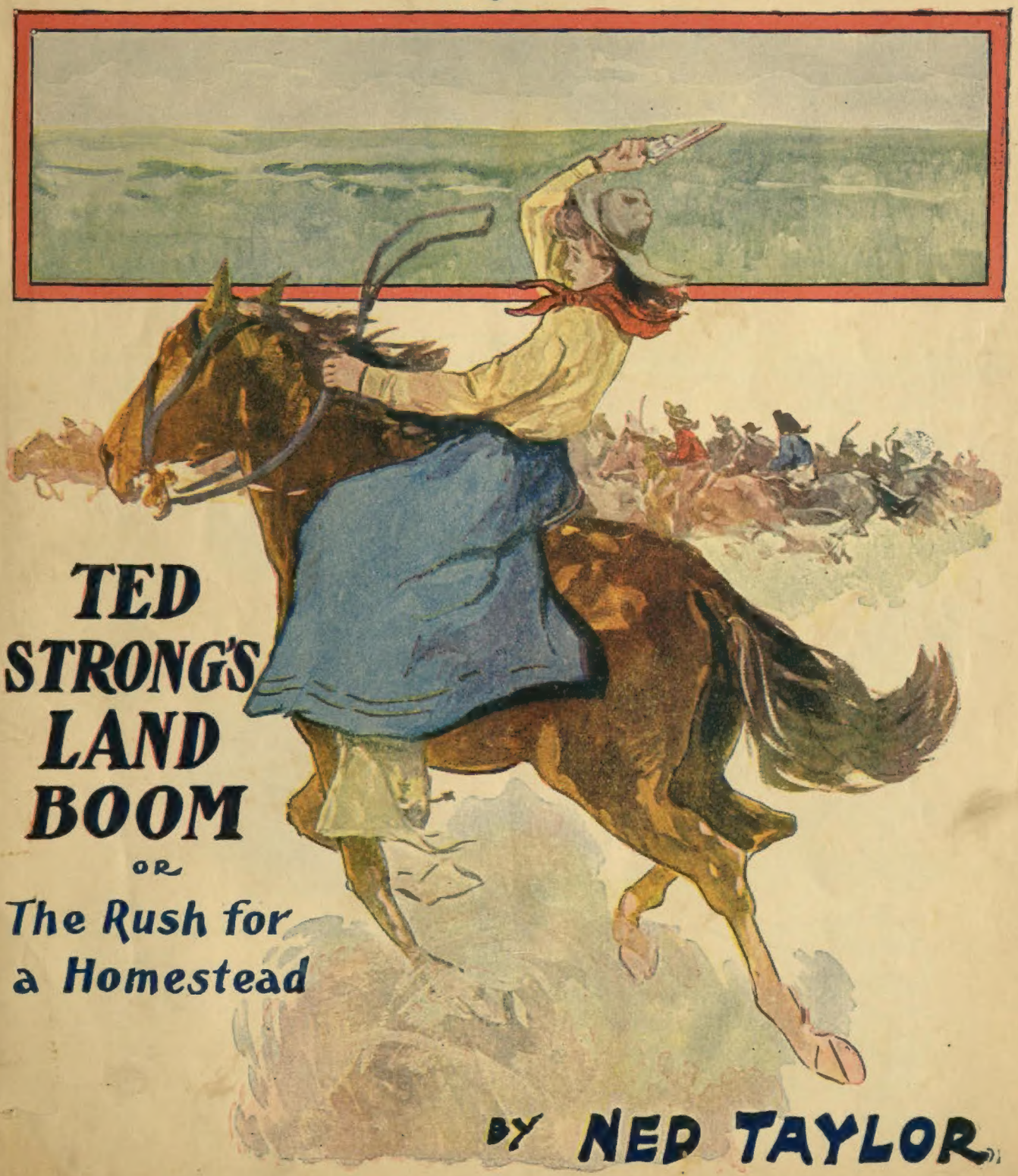
The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

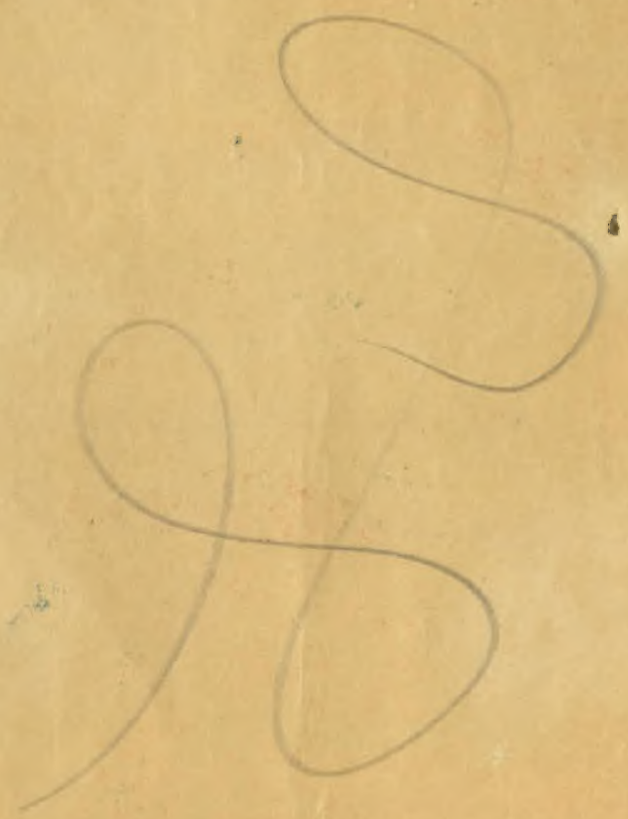


TED STRONG'S LAND BOOM

OR

The Rush for a Homestead

BY NED TAYLOR



The Young Rough Riders Weekly

Most Fascinating Western Stories

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Ted Strong's Land Boom;

OR,

THE RUSH FOR A HOMESTEAD.

By NED TAYLOR.

CHAPTER I.

AN UNDESIRABLE ACQUAINTANCE.

"This town is filling up pretty quick, isn't it?"

The speaker was a flashily-dressed man with a big, black cigar. He was a man with a very red face and with a large, dark mustache. A diamond of notable size and luster glittered in the midst of a broad expanse of colored shirt bosom. This man's eyes were small, and black, and glittering, his under jaw stuck out so that when he held his cigar between his teeth it was tilted up at an acute angle, and he was so highly scented with heavy perfume that the atmosphere in his vicinity resembled a good deal that of a chemist's shop.

He had addressed Ted Strong, who, dressed in his neatly fitting khaki suit and holding his broad-brimmed hat in his hand, was standing idly on the porch of the Saybrook Hotel, in the little California town of Ceriso. breathing the sweet morning air.

Ted glanced at the man before he answered. He had seen him hanging around the hotel for the past few days, and did not altogether like his looks. He had also seen him engaged in playing at cards with several of the young men who were stopping at the hotel, and he had noticed that the young men who played with this gaudily-dressed individual generally lost their money.

"Yes," said Ted, "there are a good many people here

now." He moved away from the flashily-dressed man, for something about the stranger's appearance repelled him, and he did not feel that he wished to make his acquaintance. The loudly-dressed man, however, seemed very anxious to talk to the young rough rider, and he strolled after him along the wide porch of the hotel.

"All these fellers are here to claim lands from the government as soon as that new strip of territory is open for settlers, I suppose," he said.

"I daresay," said Ted, coldly.

"I suppose you and your friends have come down for that purpose yourselves. Good opportunity for a young feller out here in the West. I was born and brought up in Boston, and I've traveled all over the United States. Have a cigar?"

Ted declined the weed, and the stranger returned it to his pocket.

"You don't smoke, eh? That's good," he said. "I suppose you have filed your application for a claim."

"No," said Ted; "I don't intend to make any claim. I just stopped over here to see what one of these land booms is like."

"Oh!" said the stranger. He stood smoking in silence, eying Ted stealthily the while. He finally came to the conclusion that the rough rider was some rich young fellow who was out seeing the country and was able to live without working. His manner at once became even more cordial than before.

"Sorry you don't smoke, in one way," he said: "it's bad for the health, but then you miss one of the greatest of the pleasures of life. I'm very glad to have met you. I don't know many people here in town, and, as I am an Easterner, I am glad to meet one of my own kind like yourself."

"My present home is in Texas," said Ted; "before that, I lived up in Dakota."

"Is that so?" said the red-faced man. "I knew a great many Texans, and I always liked them. They are dead game sports down in Texas, every one of them. I am glad that I have met you. Your name is Strong, I believe; I happened to notice it on the book when I registered, and I heard one of the clerks call you by name."

In reality this man had made several inquiries about Ted Strong after he had learned that Ted and his three companions, Kit Summers, Ben Tremont and Bud Morgan, were living in the best suite of rooms in the hotel.

"My name is James Dolan," he said. "Jim, most of the boys call me that know me; 'Honest Jim,' that's the name by which I am known in the East among my friends."

At that moment Kit Summers and Ben Tremont strolled out on the porch. The voice of Bud Morgan could be heard from somewhere in the stable yard remonstrating with one of the stable men for not feeding enough oats to his horse.

"I am glad to have met you," continued Dolan; "I'm due inside for some breakfast about now. So long, my boy. If you or your friends need assistance to pass the time away, or are on the lookout for a little fun, just call on Honest Jim Dolan. I'll take care of you and give you a rip-snorting time."

"Thanks," said Ted, as Dolan strolled grandly off, leaving a reeking trail of cigar smoke in his wake. As he went into the hotel Kit and Ben approached Ted.

Kit nodded toward the portly figure of Honest Jim, just disappearing through the doorway.

"I saw you talking to that fellow," he said; "he was speaking to us this morning. What do you think of him, Ted?"

"Not very much. He seemed mighty anxious to make my acquaintance, though."

"Same here," drawled Ben Tremont; "he was overcome by my fascinations when we were inside at break-

fast. He came up and talked to us and offered to show us a good time if we wanted to go around and see the sights of Ceriso."

"He was hanging about with Earl Rossiter and Lew Tuttle before they got mixed up in that cattle business and cleared out," said Kit. "I think that he's a gambler by profession."

"I presume that he made a little out of Lew and Earl," said Ben; "I guess they were pretty easy meat for a gambling man."

"I think that it's a shame the way those fellows got away," said Kit, hotly; "they were the people who laid the plot to steal the cows from Slaughter's herd, and they were really responsible for it. Besides that, it was their plan to get us blamed for the affair. They ought to have gone to jail twenty years for that. It might have taught them a lesson."

"Maybe it has taught them a lesson. How's your arm, Kit? It wasn't broken, after all?"

"It feels all right now," said Kit, "and I haven't had the sling on since last night. It hurt enough so that it felt as though it was broken, and it was paralyzed at the time the shot hit me. But the bones are all right, and in a week it will be just as good as ever."

"I think we got off pretty well," said Ben Tremont. "Ted's wound wasn't more than a scratch, and yours is coming around all right now. It wasn't the fault of those cattle rustlers that we were not hurt, though. I tell you that fellow that was sitting on Ted and just getting ready to plug him between the eyes with his revolver butt meant business."

"He would have done my business for me all right if you had not knocked him off, Ben," said Ted, with a smile, "but he's in jail now. That fellow was wanted for a dozen crimes, and I'm glad that we caught him. That thousand dollars reward that was on his head was a mighty nice thing for Rose Casey when she got it. The girl needed the money pretty badly. She has a sick mother who needs medicine and medical attention, and her father doesn't amount to much."

"It's a shame that those fellows, Rossiter and Tuttle, got off so easy, though," said Ted; "they stayed only two nights in the jail here, and then managed to get out. That shows what it means to have money. They were able to hire a slick lawyer and nothing was proved against them."

"Well," said Ted, "you see no cattle had been driven off, and they were nowhere near the herd when Ben and Bud gathered them in. It was pretty hard to prove that they had anything to do with it when it came to making out a case in court. Those fellows who were arrested with them were a pretty tough gang of rustlers, but there is one thing about these Western bad men. No matter how desperate they are, they are very unwilling to turn State's evidence or implicate a companion, and, besides that, they probably expect that Rossiter and Tuttle will pay them pretty well for their silence. They know that Lew and Earl are the sons of very rich men."

At this point a rather good-looking fellow stepped up on the steps of the porch beside them. He was roughly dressed, and he looked like a young cattle man. His features were good, but as he approached Ted, the young rough rider could see that there was a strange, desperate expression in his eyes.

"I'd like ter see Mr. Jim Dolan," he said.

Ted pointed into the window of the dining room, in which Mr. Dolan could be seen discussing a hearty breakfast with a good appetite. The young man thanked the boy and stepped inside. A few moments later the boys could see him seated at the same table and talking to Dolan. Then the two left the table and went out of the hotel together, Dolan nodding pleasantly at the boys as he passed.

"Wonder who that is he has in tow?" said Kit.

"Some dupe," said Ted. "That boy has the look in

his eye that I have seen in men who have lost everything at the gaming table. He is probably one of Dolan's victims."

"He's a nice-looking fellow," said Kit; "it's a shame that a fellow like Dolan could be allowed to fleece him of money that he had probably earned by good, hard work, but I suppose that it's impossible for us to interfere. Hello, Ted, here's a girl coming up, and she looks as though she wants to speak to you."

A girl was walking up the street toward the hotel, and her eyes were fixed on Ted, who turned around to meet her. It was Rose Casey, the beautiful girl whom Ted had befriended a short time before when Earl Rossiter had insulted her, and who had informed him of a plot Rossiter had formed to steal a thousand cattle and lay the blame on the young rough riders.

CHAPTER II.

WHAT ROSE CASEY WANTED TO SEE TED ABOUT.

The girl who was coming along the street had her eyes fixed on Ted, and she kept her eyes fixed on him as she mounted the steps leading up to the piazza of the Saybrook Hotel. Ted noticed her as she approached and thought that she looked prettier than ever. The fact that her clothes were worn and shabby did not detract in the least from the beauty of her face, the brilliant luster of her eyes, the clear pink-and-white of her skin.

Ted took off his hat as she came up to him and bowed. Rose nodded slightly and glanced around at the other two boys.

"Good-morning," she said; "I would like to speak to you for a few moments, if you have the time."

"Certainly, I have the time," said Ted. "Won't you sit down?" He pushed forward a chair as he spoke. Rose Casey did not notice the chair nor answer Ted's remarks. She kept her eyes fixed on Kit and Ben.

Kit turned to Ben and whispered in an undertone to him:

"That's a sort of a hint for us to drop away into the background."

Ben nodded and grunted inarticulately, and the two went off together.

Rose watched them until they had disappeared around the corner of the porch, then she turned again to Ted.

"I don't want to seem rude to your friends," she said, "but I want to talk to you about something; and it's something I don't want to tell anyone else. I don't want to tell you about it, either, goodness knows! but I need a friend, and you are about the only real friend I have. Most of the people about here are too high-toned to talk much to me. Not that I care!" The girl's black eyes snapped. "Goodness knows if it was only myself I wouldn't care about the whole lot of them. I guess that I can manage to take care of myself by this time. But it's about some one else. That's what makes it hard."

"Sit down," said Ted, "and tell me what it is that you want me to do."

He could see that the girl was worried a great deal about something, and he knew that the kindest thing that he could do would be to wait and let her tell her trouble in her own way. She sank into the chair and fixed her eyes on the ground. Then, raising them suddenly, she spoke.

"I don't know how it is that I feel that I can tell a thing like this to you," she said. "I couldn't tell it to anyone else. It's hard, but don't be afraid of me crying or anything like that. Those swell young ladies that you know may do things like that, but a girl who has had to work hard all her life and worry a whole lot can't afford luxuries like that much. I want to speak to you about Jack—Jack Malone."

"Jack Malone?"

"Yes, that's his name. You don't know him nor

never heard of him, I reckon. He's the man I'm engaged ter be married to."

"Engaged to be married to!"

"You needn't look so surprised. We've been engaged about a year, and we would have been married an' happy now, I reckon, if Jack hadn't been wild and foolish. He was workin' on a ranch up near Wind River, an' if he'd stuck there an' saved his money, I guess we might have been married now an' livin' comfortable in a little place like respectable folks. But Jack was foolish. He got to gamblin' a little an' he won a little money. That was ther worst thing that could have happened ter him. If he had only lost at ther first, it might have cured him. But he didn't; he won an' he got ther fever. He threw up his job an' began to play hard. At first he won, but then he lost. He was pretty desprit sometimes, an' I useter be afraid he might do somethin' dishonest. But, thank Heaven, he never did yet. He was that anxious ter get money fer me—thet's why he played. He was always an honest boy. When I got that thousand dollars through you, Ted—I mean, Mr. Strong"—the girl flushed and corrected herself hastily—"I was the happiest girl in ther world. Jack was in debt, but there was enough there ter pay all his debts. There was enough left over to pay partly fer a piece of land out near here, an' we could hev settled down tergether. It was too good ter be true! I might have known that nothin' like thet would ever happen ter a girl like me. I thought thet Jack was cured, an' thet he wouldn't gamble no more. He was ter pay off all what he owed, and then make arrangements for ther wedding. We was a-plannin' how we was goin' ter invite you to it, Mr. Strong, but I guess as how that's all off now."

The girl came to a sudden stop and Ted knew that she could not continue without breaking down and weeping, and that her stubborn pride made her unwilling to do that. She swallowed hard once or twice as though there were something in her throat that she wished to get rid of, and Ted could see her worn, rough hands clinched so tightly that the knuckles showed white through the skin.

"Did you turn the money over to him?" asked Ted.

The girl nodded silently.

"I'm not a-blamin' Jack," she said, suddenly; "I'd like ter hear anyone say a word agin' Jack! But he was foolish, thet's all. I ain't seen him in three days, an' I'm afeered, oh! I'm sure thet he's gamblin' again! I know thet's ther only thing would make him act this way. I don't mind so very much fer myself. I could always make out ter get along some way. I've had a hard upbringin', an' I'm used ter disappointments. But Jack, when he loses thet money I give him, he'll never look at me again. I know how he'll feel because I trusted him. But he was sorter weak, I guess. He'll jest take ter drinkin', or maybe he'll shoot hisself because he won't never want ter see me again—I don't know what to do—I thought maybe as how you had been so kind about ther reward an' all, you might find him somewhere and get him ter give it up an' tell him it's all right."

"Where was he playing?" asked Ted, sternly.

"There's two or three places about ther town here."

"Who is he likely to be with?"

"There's a feller right at this here hotel. A big, red-faced man. I'd like to kill him! I'd like ter ask yer a question: Is it wrong always ter hate a man so's ye wish he was dead? I hate this man that way. An' if any harm comes ter Jack, he'd better look out!"

"Do you know his name?"

"Dolan is his name, I think."

"Malone has not been working lately?"

"No, he's been hangin' about with this man. It spoils him fer work an' everything. There is a hull lot of crooks in ther town here sence it hes been fillin' up

so quick. On account of this openin' of ther new lands, yer know, there's new gamblin' houses an' a lot of saloons openin' up. 'This Dolan is one of these fellers. He is well-dressed an fat, an' he lives in good rooms at ther hotel here. But he's a perfessional gambler, that's all he is."

"I know that stamp of man. There are plenty of them circulating about through the West. They are a bad lot, and, of course, a town like this, suddenly filling up with people coming out to rush into these new lands as soon as they are opened, is a regular rendezvous for them. The people who come on the hope of laying a claim are, a great many of them, improvident, reckless, hand-to-mouth fellows. They all have a little money to live on till the lands are declared open, and they are ready and willing, the greater part of them, to gamble it all away. I have met this man Dolan that you speak of."

"Well, do you think that I could do anything if I went to him an' told him? He might hev some good in him. He might take pity on me an' Jack."

Ted shook his head and smiled sadly. He knew the stamp of man Dolan was too well. He knew that desperate women had in all probability appealed to him before, and he knew that such a man as Dolan would only laugh at them.

Perhaps the worst thing about gambling is the terrible effect it has upon the human character. It has been said that not even drunkenness can rob a man of all kindliness and sense of honor as gambling can. The confirmed drunkard may still have some sparks of good in him. His vice is one that affects the body first and primarily, and, though it affects the mind and character, it does so only indirectly. But gambling has its first direct influence on the character. It arouses passions of greed and selfishness; it fosters them and helps their growth until they dominate the whole man. No matter how noble or good a man is, if he begins to gamble his character will surely change. He will lose all sense of right and wrong, he will lose all notions of prudence and decency; the gaming spirit will seize fast hold upon him and drag him lower and lower. He can never succeed in business, for his business sense will have become blunted and dulled. His habits of mind will have changed so that he will trust to blind chance, the ungrateful goddess he has been worshiping, for success, rather than to his own abilities or perseverance. It is well known that people who play for the first time generally win, although they may be entirely ignorant of all the rules of the game of chance which they play. It seems sometimes as though the gambling spirit were some malignant demon which set a bait in the shape of easily gotten gains to entrap its victims. Then, once it has fastened a firm hold on them, it robs them of money first, of character and honor, of ambition and hope, often of life itself. The confirmed gambler always has the luck against him and always loses in the long run. He is good for nothing. He is utterly without scruples or moral sense. He will play cards for the grave of his mother, and sacrifice all that he should hold nearest and dearest to his selfish worship of blind chance.

Ted knew all this, and knew that any appeal to the feelings of such a man as Dolan would be useless. His lips set in a stern, hard line as he looked at the sorrowful face of the girl who sat before him, and a steely glitter came into his eyes.

"Then can I do nothing?" said Rose. "You have been kind to me. I know that you can help me. Can you do nothing?"

Ted rose to his feet and looked at her with sad kindly eyes.

"Perhaps I can," he said. "I am going to try, anyway."

The girl started to her feet and clasped him by the hand.

"Oh," she said, "if you save Jack I will be grateful to you and pray for you all my life. You can do it."

"I hope so," said Ted.

"You can! I can see it in your eyes! You couldn't fail in anything you tried! Everything must come easy to you. And please save poor Jack, for he's a good boy an' an honest boy yet."

"There are lots of things that are hard for me," said Ted, "and this is going to be hard, but if it is possible I'll get Jack out of the clutches of this rascal and run him out of the town!"

CHAPTER III.

NEW GUESTS AT THE SAYBROOK.

Ted left the hotel a few minutes after bidding the girl good-by and promising her to do all he could to get Dolan to relinquish his hold on her sweetheart. He did not see a great chance of doing very much with Dolan. He could not drive the gambler out of town by denouncing him, as he might have done in some parts of the East, for Ceriso, like a good many other Western towns, allowed and encouraged gamblers to visit it for the money that they brought into the place. For all that, Ted determined to see Dolan and to do what he could. He surmised that the young fellow whom he had seen speaking to him, and with whom he had gone away that morning, was Jack Malone, and he remembered that the young man had a decidedly worried look on his face. He imagined that there would not be much of the thousand dollars left by the time he saw him again, and he hurried away, determined to make the round of the places in town where Dolan and his victim would be likely to visit. There were a good many saloons and gambling dens in Ceriso, and Ted's task promised to be a lengthy one. He had told Ben Tremont, Bud Morgan, and Kit Summers of his mission, and all three had decided to go with him, as they had nothing else to do to pass the time away while they were staying in the town. All four left the hotel together.

Ten minutes after they had left, the landlord, Mr. Brooke, was astonished to see three other boys, all dressed in khaki suits and wearing sombreros, approaching the hotel.

There were a good many strangers in Ceriso, but none of them looked like these fellows. One of them, who was walking a little in advance of the other two, was a short, slight boy with cheeks as red as apples, underneath his tan.

He must have been a great deal stronger than he looked, for he was carrying along a big portmanteau which would have made a respectable load for a drayman. The other two, who came behind him, walked arm-in-arm as though they were the dearest of friends. They presented a queer contrast. One of them was tall and dark, and so slender that it seemed as if the wind might blow him away. His face wore a very mournful, dissatisfied expression, and his cheeks were hollow like those of a consumptive or a dyspeptic. His legs, which were clothed in tight-fitting khaki leggings, were very thin, but they looked as if they were as hard as iron. The actions of this lanky fellow did not seem to accord very well with his looks. He carried in one hand a large apple pie, and was taking great bites of it and gulping them down as he marched up the street.

His companion was his direct antithesis in appearance. He was extremely blond, extremely short, and extremely fat. His eyes, a pale china-blue in color, were half buried in his fat, rosy cheeks. His lips were wreathed into a benignant smile, and he ambled along by the side of his tall companion as though he were at peace with himself and all the world. The thumbs of his fat, chubby hands were tucked into his leather belt, which was big enough to have gone twice around

his friend, and his sombrero was pushed to the back of his head.

When the trio reached the hotel porch the little fellow in advance laid his valise down on the porch with a resounding thump.

"Gentlemen," he said, in a high, squeaky voice, "I am charmed to see you all. Ceriso is indeed a lovely city. It is a place where, as the great poet, Shakespeare, remarks: 'Every prospect pleases and only man is vile.' I beg your pardon, gentlemen, for seeming to say that you are vile. I only seemed to say it, you know; in reality, I was quoting the poet. There was nothing personal about it at all."

"Every brospect bleases," muttered the short, fat boy, sleepily, "but I am bleased mit der town alretty yet mineselluf. But der brospect oof a nice, soft bed to sleep mineselluf in is der best brosbect after der sduffy railroad mit der sleebing cars mit der little shelfs for beds. Der next time a railroad sleeps mit me I dink I will suffocate mineselluf mit der hot air."

"What do I care about beds!" said the tall boy, in a deep voice, somewhat marred by the fact that his mouth was still full of pie. "Sleep is not for an invalid like me. What I want to know is whether the air here is healthful or not."

Mr. Brooke stared from one to the other of the three boys with a smile on his face.

"This is generally considered a pretty healthy town," he said; "it all depends, I suppose, upon what disease a man has. Many invalids have been accommodated here and have been benefited by it a great deal."

"Indeed," said the tall chap, sinking into a chair while he languidly devoured the last fragments of his apple pie; "perhaps people suffering from the same complaints as I have may have been here."

"What are you suffering from?" asked the landlord. "Is it anything the matter with the lungs?"

"Yes, that and other things. I have been examining myself while we came along on the train and comparing my symptoms with those discussed in Dr. Killem's Medical Encyclopedia. I find that I have pleurisy, dropsy, the gout, and housemaids' knee. I have student's elbow and hod-carrier's shoulder. I have smoker's heart—although I never smoke—and diver's cramps. I have sciatica, symptoms of sclerosis of the liver, scarification of the carcophagus and scarlitina. I am threatened with appendicitis, neuritis, gastritis, enteritis and cephalitis. I have hoboe's foot and writer's cramp, indigestion, insomnia, inanition, ingrown nails, and several other complications of a like nature. I have had spinal cerebro meningitis, touches of Asiatic cholera, inflammation, suppuration and vexation. I am thoroughly worn out and want something to eat—say a bowl of rich soup, a boiled fish, a few pounds of steak, vegetables, potatoes, corn fritters, and hominy, apple pie and coffee. I can't eat much owing to the weak state of my stomach."

"Good heavens!" said Mr. Brooke. "I should think that you would be unable to travel!"

"He never told us the whole of the dreadful truth before," said the little, rosy-cheeked fellow who had been carrying the portmanteau. "As Shakespeare says, 'concealment, like a worm i' the bud, preyed on his damask cheek. He pined in thought and with a green and yellow melancholy, he sat like a living hospital full of all diseases.'"

"We haf had enough oof der Shagsbeare for der bresent," said the fat boy; "what we want to know mineselluf iss, does der hotel here live mit Misder Teddie Strong?"

"Ted Strong is staying here, if that's what you want to know," said the landlord.

"Dot iss der sifficientness," said the fat boy; "a wise to der word iss ass goot as a kick mit der plind mule. Oof Teddie is here, der hotel will live mit us inside oof it. Lead der rooms to us so dot we can wash der water mit our faces. Der name oof id is Carl Schwartz. I came from Chermany, although I can sbeak to der English lankwich as easier dan der men who is born in der United States. Der two oders iss Pop Martin unt Thaddeus Perkins. I am der spokesmaker for der barty pecause der English lankwich sbeaks mit me mitout so much fluency as der foreigners. We will register mit der hotel pook unt live here."

Carl made this long speech with a great deal of wild gesticulation. The landlord understood his gestures

rather better than his words, and a boy was sent upstairs with the valise which Bob Martin had been carrying. The three boys went upstairs, divested themselves of some of the dust they had picked up on their journey from Texas, and came downstairs again to find that a meal was in course of preparation for them. The fact that they were friends of the young rough riders caused the landlord to treat them with a good deal of consideration, even though the town was overcrowded with people.

"Dis iss der surbrise barty," explained Carl. "We heard dot Teddie wass here unt we made up our mindts dot we would come here unt make Teddie surbrise us. It wass a good idea, for dere is a landt poom in der town unt we will see it all."

The landlord saw the three boys seated comfortably before a hearty meal, and told them that as friends of the young rough riders they might call for the best in the house.

He noticed with considerable surprise that the long and lanky fellow, who had professed to be such an invalid, had an appetite and capacity as great as the other two combined, and that he tucked away eatables with a voracity that would have driven a boarding-house keeper to suicide.

"Pretty good grub," said Bob Martin, as he noticed Beanpole sailing into it. "Look out Beanpole, old boy, and don't eat too little. There's nothing so treacherous as starvation. It steals upon you when you are least expecting it, and one should always guard against it by eating three hearty meals a day."

"But what can you do when you haven't the appetite?" asked Beanpole, gloomily.

"Stimulate it in every way you can. Practice eating, trying to eat more each day. As Shakespeare says, 'Practice makes perfect, and those who start with a meal a day ofttimes, by perseverance, develop into human boa constrictors.' "

"Dot iss der kind oof snake," said Carl, "I don'd want to pe a snake."

"Nobody said you did," said Bob Martin; "you have no ambition, anyway."

"What iss dot?" said Carl. "I haf no ambition! I haf more ambition than you haf, anyways."

"You fellows make me so nervous that I can't eat," said Beanpole; "let's hurry up and finish dinner, and then hunt Ted up. It's bad for us to hurry much at our eating, but still it doesn't matter a great deal to me. I have a complicated bunch of diseases, as it . . . that's something terrible to think about. It doesn't matter much to me now what I do. I'm bound to suffer."

"You makes me tired mit mineselluf mit your diseasedness," said Carl. "Vot iss der matter mit you iss, dot you are not so sick as you think you iss. Oof you vas really sick I would také der brober medicines unt cure mineselluf, but oof you are not sick vot iss der use oof me takin' medicines?"

"You are talking through your hat, my friend," said Bob Martin. "As Billy Shakespeare says in his immortal plays, 'Words—idle words—I know not what they mean!' "

"Vot I mean iss der meaning oof vot I say," said Carl, getting rather red in the face from his efforts to express himself and eat at the same time. "Oof you cannot understand yourselluf in der plain English lank-which, vell den id iss mine fault."

"All right," said Bob, "let it go at that. It's your fault, but I forgive you. I accept your apologies."

"I don'd haf no apologies," said Carl, angrily; "you iss der one to haf der apologies."

"That's right," said Bob, "I have just accepted them."

"You iss a fool!" shouted Carl. "You talk as if der insultedness was from me to you. I say dot oof I don't understand mineselluf it is your fault."

"If you fellows don't shut up," said Beanpole, "you will kill me outright. The strain of listening to you two fellows is something terrible. I can't stand it much longer. My nerves are a complete wreck as it is, and if you don't keep quiet I am perfectly sure that I shall collapse in my chair. Then, perhaps, you will be sorry."

"Yaw," muttered Carl, as he went on eating, "sorry for der chair."

"I'm through," said Bob Martin, pushing back his chair. "As my guide, philosopher, and friend, William Shakespeare, remarks, 'Enough is as good as a feast, but too much eating brings on the jim jams.'"

"I guess I am through, also," said Beanpole. "Come on, fellows, let us take a walk around the town and look up Ted Strong. I am anxious to see what this place is like. It will be a big surprise for Ted, and Kit, and Ben, and Bud when they see us here. They think we are away back in Texas."

"They little know what devoted friends we are, how we would endure the perils and discomforts of a long journey on the railway just to see them again, just to look into their faces and to clasp them by the hand. Come on and we'll hunt them up. They are not in the hotel now."

The three boys left the table and walked out to the porch. They picked up their hats from the chairs where they had laid them, and were all ready to start when Carl suddenly raised his right hand and looked solemnly at his two friends.

"Vait!" he said, gravely. "We iss making der mistake!"

"What is it?" gasped Beanpole. "Do I look pale? Do you think that a sinking spell is coming over me?"

"Nein," said Carl, "but all der same we iss making der mistake. We iss doing vot is a craziness oof we all dree go ouid. One should stay pehind to vatch der blaces here. Ted may come pack unt den ve vould miss him."

"Carl, you have a great head on your shoulders," said Bob Martin; "you certainly have hit upon a bright idea. My own wonderful brain is so taken up with weightier problems that I have little time to think of the things of this mundane sphere. I need a simple, practical, level-headed chap like you with me to keep me from soaring too high in empyrean flights of poetic meditation. You have hit upon an idea that actually escaped my colossal brain. You have done well."

"Dot iss right," said Carl, "I am a goot thinker, all right alretty yet. Unt I shall pe der one to stay pehind."

"Yes," said Beanpole, "you had better stay. I feel weak, but if I didn't take a little walking exercise after dinner I don't know what would happen to me."

"You might fall asleep," said Bob Martin.

"Asleep!" said Beanpole; "I might sleep the sleep that knows no waking."

"Well, then, you and I had better go and search the streets of the city for our wandering but dearly loved friend, Ted Strong. Oh, Ted, were you but here to know the devotion of your humble but intellectual friends, how your heart would overflow with feelings of pride and exultation! How you would throb with pride as you thought of us! As Shakespeare says——"

"Never mind Shakespeare," said Beanpole. "Let us start off and take a walk around the town. Carl will wait behind in the hotel and meet any of the boys who happen to come back; won't you, Carl?"

"Yaw," said Carl, "pe careful mit yoursellufs unt don'd get lost in der shuffles."

"Don't talk too much, Carl," said Bob; "you might get your tongue tangled up and choke yourself."

"Nefer mindt my tongue," said Carl, "oof you choke yourselluf mit my tongue id iss none oof your pusiness. Goot-by."

Beanpole and Bob Martin, the long and the short, walked briskly off together. Carl sank wearily into a chair and watched them as they disappeared up the street. He felt rather full and sleepy after his heavy meal, and he worked himself down and down further in the chair to try and get into a position in which he could rest comfortably. But somehow he did not have very much success at this, and he finally rose to his feet and stretched himself. He was quite drowsy now. When he had been down at the Las Animas Ranch, in Mexico, it had been his custom to take a siesta every afternoon after dinner, and he always slept like a top. He had eaten a heavy meal this afternoon, and the heat of the day and the meal combined made him feel very sleepy.

He wandered about the porch and the sitting room of the hotel, trying the various chairs one after the other, but none of them seemed to suit him. Some were too soft and some were too hard. In some the backs stood up and down too much, and in others they

were tilted too much off the perpendicular. At last he gave up trying to get a comfortable chair in which to doze.

"Himmel blitz!" he exclaimed, stretching himself again, "I must haf der sleep or I will haf indigestions vich Peanpole has alretty yet. I will slip kerviety up der stairs to mine own leedle room unt lay mineselluf down on der ped. I will haf a leedle sleep unt wake up all nice unt refreshed mit mineselluf. When Teddie comes home I will be here to meet him vide avake unt lifely. Dot is der pest blan."

Slowly and heavily Carl made his way up the stairs and out on the corridor which ran all the way across the second floor of the Saybrook and upon which all the bedrooms opened. Carl did not remember the number of his own bedroom, but he thought that he would have no difficulty in finding it, and he was too lazy and sleepy to go down to the desk again to find out which it was.

He made his way along the corridor until he came to a door that was partly open.

He pushed it open still farther and looked in. So far as he could see it was empty. He glanced about it and saw on the floor a big valise or portmanteau such as the boys carried their spare clothing and belongings in on their trip. The room had three beds in it, and he remembered that all three of his party had their beds in the same room. He concluded that he had struck the right room at once.

Over in an alcove there was a bed partly sheltered by a curtain, which appeared to be larger and more comfortable than the two others. The curtains were drawn so that it was shielded from the light, which poured into the room through the two windows. The bed looked very inviting, and Carl immediately made for it.

He threw himself down upon it, and then half raised himself with a start. His hand had encountered a human face, and, looking closer, he could see that there was a man lying in the bed, motionless and apparently dead!

CHAPTER IV.

WHAT CARL LISTENED TO.

Carl gave vent to a muttered exclamation and looked closer. The man who was lying across the bed looked to be a young fellow of about twenty-two or twenty-three. He was heavily built and a little above the medium height. He was fully dressed and his clothes, as well as the deep tan on his face, indicated that he had worked as a cattleman. At first Carl thought that he was dead, but a moment later he ascertained that he was breathing. There was a deathly pallor underneath his tan, and it was plain to anyone that the sleep he was now in was not a natural one, even had there not been a crumpled handkerchief lying across his mouth and nostrils, as though it had been pressed there by some one and left there.

Carl could detect a heavy, rather disagreeable odor in the alcove, and he knew that some narcotic had been used on the man who was lying unconscious before him.

Carl was not particularly quick-witted, but it did not require very quick wits to see that here was foul play of some kind. He was just drawing back from the bed, intending to rush out of the room, when he heard footsteps on the corridor outside. A sudden panic seized the German youth. This might be some one to fear. He might be the man who had just chloroformed the fellow who was lying across the bed. Carl felt that he would be caught if he attempted to leave the room now. He suddenly leaped across the bed and dropped down on the other side of it nearest the wall. It was a rather tight squeeze for a boy of Carl's avoirdupois, but he was wide awake by this time, and he finally managed to squeeze under the bed.

He had scarcely concealed himself there when the door was pushed open, and two people entered the room. The first walked with very heavy footsteps, and his first move when he entered the room was to walk over to the bed and glance at the unconscious form stretched across it. He bent over the bed, under which Carl lay quaking with fright, and pressed the handkerchief a little tighter to the nostrils of the man who had been drugged.

Then he hurriedly drew the curtain across the front of the alcove and stepped back into the middle of the room. He was a man above the middle height, red-faced and with a black mustache, the same man, in fact, who had introduced himself to Ted as Jim Dolan, that morning.

The other person who had entered the room with him was Ted Strong himself!

Ted had entered several moments after Dolan, and he had not followed him over to the alcove within which was the bed with the unconscious man stretched across it. Dolan had been careful to keep himself between the bed and the door until the curtain was drawn across the alcove, shutting it off from view entirely. Ted had scarcely looked in the direction of the bed, for his mind was on other things, and, of course, he had no idea what was in the alcove.

Dolan stepped back from it after drawing the curtain and turned to the young rough rider with a broad smile upon his face.

"Mr. Strong," he said, "I'm glad to see you up here. It's lucky I met you on the street as I did. Sit down. You said you wanted to have a little talk with me."

The gambler drew up a couple of chairs before a marble-topped table and set out glasses and a bottle of whisky.

"Shall I ring for water?" he said, "or do you take it straight?"

"Don't ring on my account," said Ted; "I don't want any water just at present."

"Oh! you drink it neat, then. That's the proper way to drink it. Say when."

The gambler had lifted the bottle to pour some of the whisky out into a glass for Ted, but the young rough rider stretched forth his hand and stopped him.

"None for me, at all," he said; "I don't drink."

"Nonsense! Between friends it's all right. Just a wee nip to cement the friendship!"

"A friendship that needs cementing that way," said Ted, "isn't worth much. I don't drink at all."

"There useter be a time when a refusal ter drink with a man meant an insult."

"That rule doesn't apply to me. I never drink with anyone."

Dolan filled himself a good-sized bumper and lit a fat, black cigar. Then he picked up a pack of cards that lay on the table and began to shuffle and cut them with a skill that must have been the result of long experience.

"I was telling you this morning that I could show you all the sport you wanted," he said. "I know that a young fellow like you needs a little excitement. I sometimes drop a few hundred in a night over a pack of cards. I have awfully bad luck with them, and yet, strange to say, I could never keep away from them. I could never understand why people took such an objection to gambling. To me it seems a most gentlemanly way of passing away the time, and, to tell you the truth, old man, I never had any use for a fellow who didn't take a spin at the wheel sometimes, or bet a few dollars on the aces, or drop a dollar or so at a game of poker. Mark my words, Mr. Strong, a man that won't take a chance now and then is a man you can't trust. He's not a good fellow. He's a coward and a ninny, and you know that you can never depend on a man of that kind. What I like is a free-spoken young chap, with some daring and courage, who isn't afraid to back his luck. That's the way to succeed. All our wealthy men have been gamblers. Wall Street is just as much of a gamble as poker."

Ted said nothing, nor did his face change as he listened to this eulogy of gambling. He was thinking that it was by speeches of this kind that Dolan persuaded his dupes to gamble with him, and that most of the young fellows he played with had started to play just to show that they were good fellows and not afraid to risk their money.

It is this ambition to be what is called a "good fellow" that starts many a young man on the downward path that ends either in suicide or in prison. It is the wish to show people that he is no milksop or sissy that starts many a boy to drinking and smoking, and leads him to form habits which finally prove his undoing.

Did they but know it, they win the respect of no one in this manner. Those who persuade them to drink

and gamble secretly despise them for yielding, and reserve their respect for the boy who has the strength and courage to refuse.

Dolan kept on dealing and shuffling the cards, watching Ted Strong out of the corner of his eye. He did not want him to suspect that he was being entrapped into playing cards, for Dolan's mode of life was a good deal like angling, and he knew that he might display the bait and the hook too openly and thus scare away the human fish on whose honor and self-respect he preyed.

"Perhaps you feel like a little game now," he suggested at length.

"No," said Ted, who had been hesitating as to how to broach the subject that was uppermost in his mind, "I want to speak to you about a young fellow named Jack Malone."

"Jack Malone!"

Dolan started as he repeated the word and involuntarily cast a fleeting glance toward the curtained alcove. Ted did not notice the glance, and would not have understood it if he had. He had no idea that Jack Malone was lying drugged in that very room in which he was now sitting. For a moment Dolan's red face went to an ugly, mottled white, but he was a man accustomed to take desperate chances, used to surprises, and possessed of considerable nerve. He recovered himself almost instantly.

"Jack Malone," he repeated, thoughtfully. "It seems to me that I did know a young fellow of that name somewhere about here. I don't seem to be just able to place him."

"You know him all right," said Ted, sternly, "and you can place him if you feel like it. You've been winning money of him for the past few days, and I guess you can remember something about him."

"Did you come up here to my room to insult me?"

"No. I came up here to talk to you about this Malone. I want you to return to him that money that you won from him."

Dolan was silent for a few moments. At first he looked surprised, and then an expression of contempt came into his red face.

"Young feller," he said, "yer a little off. Ye hev been gittin' too gay lately, an' yer think yer know everything. If a grown man come up here an' made a propersition like that ter me I'd hev him sent ter ther funny house. But boys like you seem to feel a little dippy now an' then. You'd better take a good rest fer a while. You've got good, stiff nerve ter come ter me with a propersition like thet, but ye amuse me. You don't suppose I'll hand out a thousand, pretty near, ter please a kid who comes here in a rough-ridin' suit an' a fancy hat?"

"That is my proposition all the same, and I believe you will see that it is not quite so unreasonable before we get through talking."

"What do you mean? If you think that you can work me so easy you are making a mistake."

"I suppose that it would be no use appealing to your feelings?"

"Not a bit."

"Nor telling you that you were ruining the life of this man?"

Dolan smiled and lit a fresh cigar.

"Nor that you were ruining the life of the poor girl who is engaged to marry him, and whose money you won from him?"

"That talk don't cut much ice with me."

"The money he gambled with was not his own, but the girl's."

"Look here, I didn't ask him whose money it was —it's mine now."

"Well, you've robbed that poor girl of it."

"Supposing I have. What are you going to do about it?"

Dolan felt that he had the better of the argument. He knew that no one could overhear this conversation, and he enjoyed what he considered his victory over the young rough rider. He leaned his elbows on the table and grinned over at Ted in a most patronizing manner through half-shut eyelids.

"I guess you are a pretty brash sort of a boy," he said, "and I suppose that you might be able to work some people. I dare say that you are a pretty smooth talker. But it won't work with me, young man, let

me tell you that. You seem to be wise to the fact that I make my living with the cardboards. I don't deny it. I play a fair game. Nobody ever caught me cheating. It's a matter of business with me. Why don't you go and ask the hotelkeeper to refund the money that he took in from his guests last week? That's about as fair a proposition as the one you make to me."

"That isn't the same at all," said Ted. "Mr. Brooke gives his guests something in return for their money. You don't. He serves some good in the world. You are only a source of evil and trouble."

"Cut it out, boy, cut it out. I don't hanker after young preachers. How do you propose to make me hand over this money, anyway? Boy, you amuse me."

"I may amuse you some more before I get through. If you don't turn over that money I'll call on the mayor here and on Marshal Lumpkin, who is a friend of mine. I may have more influence in this town than you imagine. I'll have you run out of town anyway, and I'll have your life record looked up. Where is Malone, anyway?"

This last question was a chance shot of Ted's, but it struck home.

"Malone?"

Dolan's face paled suddenly. He gripped at the back of his chair and rose to his feet. He was surprised, and for a moment his shrewdness left him.

"What do you know about that?" he asked. "What do you mean?"

Ted was sitting back in his chair looking into Dolan's face with his steady, brown eyes. He was reading that face as he would read a book, for in the moment of his surprise the gambler had forgotten to keep up his usual inscrutable expression, and his feelings shone out through his eyes and countenance as light shines out through glass.

Ted saw the advantage he had gained. By a chance remark he had robbed the gambler of his self-control and coolness, and he meant to follow up that remark.

"I know that Malone was last seen with you," he said; "I know that I'm going to have a search put on foot; that I'm going to charge you with having something to do with his disappearance; that you will be held until he is found. It looks as though you might have robbed him. He was last seen with you, and he had a thousand dollars in his possession then. You have no visible means of support. You will be searched, your rooms may be searched, you will find yourself in more trouble than you bargained for."

These words, spoken in a low voice by the young rough rider, seemed to burn into Dolan's very brain. He was standing beside his chair and his face was ashen. Suddenly a new, desperate look shone out of his eyes. His hand came out from under the table, and in it there was a gleaming revolver.

"Young man," he said, in a low, husky voice, "you've gone too far and know too much. You will never leave this room alive!"

CHAPTER V.

A SURPRISE FOR DOLAN.

Ted Strong never moved a muscle. His eyes surveyed the quivering end of the revolver as Dolan held it pointed at him in a hand shaking with excitement, and it actually seemed to the gambler as if there was something of contemptuous amusement in the glance.

"Do you think that I am going to let you shoot me down that way?" said Ted. "I may be a good deal younger than you, but I have lived in the West for some little time. Just permit me to inform you that I have my hand in the pocket of my jacket, that there is a pistol in that pocket, and that it is pointed at your head. I don't like to burn my clothes by discharging a revolver, but I may be forced to do it. Sit down and calm yourself. You can't frighten me with that weapon. Your hand shakes so that you would miss me more than likely."

"Not much," said Dolan, "there will be no missing fire. I'll blow your cursed brains out if I hang for it. You have me up against the wall now, and you won't go out of this room to make any charges against me, curse your eyes!"

"Don't lose sight of the fact in your excitement that my revolver is still pointed directly at you head."

"What do I care? You must take me for an awful fool. There's not a charge in that pistol of yours, not a cartridge."

"How do you know?"

"How do I know? Because I took care that there shouldn't be. Because I expected that you might come up here to play cards with me to-day. Because I have played cards with young fellows before now. I have been making my living with the pasteboards for the past fifteen or twenty years. Don't you suppose that I have met fellows who got fresh and cut up desperate after they had lost all their money? I guess so! I've known 'em to pull a gun on me before now and try to hold me up at the point of it. I don't take no chances. I'll let you into one of the little secrets of the trade. Before I have a meeting with a feller ter play cards with him I see if he carries any weepins, an' I make jolly well sure that the cartridges is all drawn out of his guns before we starts. You weren't no exception, for this mornin' when you were at breakfast I went around an' found your belt of arms hangin' up in your room. There's not a cartridge in your gun now. Pull trigger if you want to. I don't mind the click."

Dolan, during this speech, had managed to pull himself together and recover his nerve. He sank into his chair again, but his hand, now almost steady, still held the revolver pointed at Ted's head. His finger, the middle finger of his right hand, was trembling on the trigger, and Ted could see that it was a hair trigger.

The young rough rider felt that he was very near eternity at that moment, very near the great divide which every pilgrim must cross in his day, very close to the black entrance to that country from whose bourne no traveler returns. He knew that he was facing a desperate man. He knew now that by a mere chance remark he had discovered a secret of Dolan's, and he knew from the desperate expression in the small, evil eyes of the gambler that he was prepared to kill him rather than let him disclose that secret. Yet there was no flinching in the gaze of the young rough rider. He faced the gambler as steadily as ever while he tried the revolver that he held concealed in his pocket, and upon which he had relied as a true friend in the time of danger, only to prove it false when he needed it most.

Click, click, click! The sound was muffled by Ted Strong's clothing. But Dolan heard it and smiled. It was an evil smile that made Ted shudder in spite of himself. Dolan had spoken the truth about the weapon.

"Ye know too much ter live," said Dolan; "this weepin hes a small caliber. It don't make much racket. There's nobody upstairs in the hotel now in the middle of the day. Nobody seen you come up with me. I'll bunk ye away with the other one an' I'll leave town ter-morrer."

Ted sat motionless. Every moment he expected to see that thick, stubby finger coil closer around the trigger, to hear the report and see the blinding flash. He knew that any movement on his part might make Dolan shoot the quicker.

For a moment Dolan hesitated. One hand was sprawled out on the table, and Ted saw it clinch and unclinch irresolutely. It is a terrible thing to shoot a man down in cold blood, and even the most hardened villain will hesitate before committing the act that will send a human soul into the great eternity, that will blot out a human life forever. Ted noticed the hand move, and in its movement he read Dolan's irresolution. He saw those thick, gross-looking fingers with the broken, dirty nails at the end picking nervously at the tablecloth.

Then he saw them clinch hard and fast, and Dolan's grim mouth set into a vicious, evil line. An overpowering impulse came to Ted to close his eyes, but he resisted it. He knew that his best plan was to watch that finger that crooked around the trigger, and when he saw it draw closer, ever so little, to duck and leap forward at the same time. He was nerving himself for this. His feet were on tiptoe on the floor, his hands pressed against the seat of his chair to help him in the leap. Every muscle was tense and hard, every nerve alive and on edge.

It seemed that the moment had come when a change

came over Dolan's face. Ted understood it. His left hand, which lay on the table, had encountered the whisky bottle there, and it had brought new ideas into his mind.

"I'll nerve myself for this," he muttered, and he raised the bottle to his lips.

For the twentieth part of a second, as he lifted the bottle, his eyes were drawn away from Ted to glance at it. For the twentieth part of a second his glance wavered and in that moment Ted leaped forward. There was a tremendous crash. Table, and man and boy went over. The pistol was discharged, but the shot struck the ceiling.

Dolan was flung backward with Ted above him, and at the same instant another figure darted forward and struck him over the head with a chair, knocking him senseless.

It was Carl Schwartz, who for once in his life and at the proper time had been wide awake and in the right place.

CHAPTER VI.

A REUNION.

Carl had been listening open-mouthed and open-eyed while he lay concealed underneath the bed. He had heard Ted's voice and had crawled out further. At first he had been frightened, but when he saw Ted make his spring he had dashed madly out, too. The bullet from Dolan's pistol, which Ted had knocked up when he made his leap, had come very near hitting him in the head as he dashed across the room, but Carl never knew how near it came to him and hence it never bothered him. He had picked up a chair as he crossed the room and had flung it at Dolan as Ted threw him backwards. It was as likely to hit Ted as his opponent, but Carl was too excited to think of this. He just threw it blindly, and, as good luck would have it, it missed Ted and struck Dolan. A moment later Carl had tumbled over and fallen against Dolan, and, although this was unintentional, it did the gambler a great deal more harm than anything he could have planned. Carl may not have been very speedy as a fighter, but he was all there when it came to the weighing in, and when he fell over the body of the gambler, Dolan was stunned by the impact.

Ted did not look up till he had pulled out his belt, and with it bound Dolan's hands together. Then he saw Carl.

"Hello, Teddie," said Carl, "dot wass a surbrise pardy dot I don'd just haf given you. Did you chust watch me when I come out mit mineselluf? Did you see me biff him in der butt mit mineselluf? I shouldn't wonder oof he has killed me when he fell on me dot way so heavy once. Oh, Teddie, it vos great, vasn't it? You unt me, we vas fighting together mit each other, only we vass on der same side unt we vass like der Chaps. We always won out. Hey, Ted?"

Carl was wildly excited over the experiences he had gone through, and his tongue had run away from him a little.

"We won out that time all right," said Ted, "but you came mighty near getting shot through the head in the first place and killing me with that chair you threw in the second place. You want to be careful when you try surprise parties like that."

"I vos a bretty prave man, anyways, Teddie," said Carl, throwing out his chest and strutting about the room. "I dell you vot, Teddie, dot vos aboud der fiercest fight we nefer vos in alretty yet."

"But how on earth did you come here?" said Ted. "Shake hands, anyway. How are you, and how are all the boys?"

"I been britty good vor der varm weather," said Carl; "der odor poys is britty good, too, only Peanpole, he haf a new disease unt it makes him suffer awful. We all come oop here alretty to see der landt poom unt to give you der surbrise party. I give it all py mineselluf—hey, Teddie? But der iss a dead man in der alcove vere I vas? I sneaked oop heer to take a sleep. I thought it was der room dot slept mit me in it, but der iss a dead man in der ped alretty, so it ain't mine room, anyhow. I don'd know how he come dere."

"A dead man!" said Ted, turning a little paler.

"That must be Malone! And that is why Dolan was so frightened."

The young rough rider dashed to the alcove, and a moment later had dragged the body of Jack Malone, Rose Casey's sweetheart, out into the light. But he was not dead yet, as Ted soon discovered, and a moment later he and Carl were working over him to restore consciousness, if possible. They were just rewarded by seeing that their patient was breathing more easily, and had just lifted him to a bed near an open window, when the rest of the young rough riders, followed by the proprietor of the hotel, rushed into the room. Some one had heard the pistol shot downstairs and notified the proprietor, and while Mr. Brooke sent for a physician to attend to Malone, and for the city marshal, Lumpkin, to look after Dolan, who still lay bound on the floor, the young rough riders shook hands with each other and there was a general reunion.

"Just my luck to be out of it!" said Kit Summers.

"I done id all py mineselluf," chortled Carl.

"The smell of the chloroform is sickening," said Beanpole; "I feel faint."

"You would have felt a heap sight fainter if you had gone through what Ted has gone through," growled Ben Tremont, to whom Ted had been relating the incidents of the morning.

"I should never have lived through it," said Beanpole. "Life is a flitting and chimerical thing, anyway. On every hand we are beset with diseases. Microbes lurk in the soup and bacilli in the milk, germs in the coffee and animalculæ in the air we breathe."

"That's right," said Bob Martin. "What does Shakespeare say—'Oh, why should the spirit of mortal be proud, a fast flying meteor, a fast flitting cloud; we may live in clover and feast upon pie, but fate still pursues us with pokes in the eye. So what is the use of eating or drinking, and dancing and fighting, and talking and thinking, and what is the use of hanging out here, when we might be in barrooms a-tossing off beer——'"

"Hold on there, stop it!" said Kit Summers. "We can't stand for any more of that. Cut it out."

"I'm surprised at you, Kit," said Bob; "you just broke the train of my thought. I was just fairly started on one of the most sublime and beautiful passages of Shakespeare and here you interrupted me with your rude, unseemly language. I am afraid that I cannot remember the rest of it now."

"I hope not," grunted Ben Tremont.

"You fellows are a set of barbarians," said Bob; "you can't appreciate the beauty of the muse. You have a treasure among you and you don't appreciate it; you have a remarkable man for a companion, a fellow who should be famous, and you don't realize it."

"Who is this remarkable man?" asked Beanpole.

"Me," said Carl, promptly; "I am der pravest fighter in dēr punch. You should haf seen me ven I vos fighting mit der chair."

"I bet the chair got the best of it," said Ben.

"Here," said Ted, "the prisoner is in good hands now, and so is Malone. We had better clear out of here, and go downstairs and get some lunch."

CHAPTER VII.

DOLAN ESCAPES.

Early next morning, Lumpkin, the city marshal, paid a visit to Ted Strong at the Saybrook Hotel.

The opening of the new strip of territory at Perkinsville, the next town on the railroad, was scheduled to take place that morning at nine o'clock. In recent cases when territories have been opened the government has experimented with a system by which the settlers put in applications for a strip of land and by which their holdings are allotted to them by drawings as if from a lottery. The recent opening of the lands of the Rosebud Indian agency was managed in this fashion and was considered a success, but it was only an experiment on the part of the government, and in the case of these lands in California the old method of opening them was pursued. A line of soldiers kept back the citizens who were anxious to stake out claims until a pistol shot announced that the lands were opened.

Then the people were let through, horseback, on foot,

and in consequence, to claim whatever portion of land they could reach first. Each was allowed one quarter section, and it was a case of sprinting or riding hard, for the people who got there first got the most desirable sites. Perkins'ville and Cresswell were filled with people, hundreds of squatters were camped out on the prairie waiting the signal, and the Saybrook Hotel was crowded with prospective settlers. When Lumpkin entered it he wore a very glum face.

"What's the matter?" said Ted, staring at him; "what has happened?"

"It's pretty bad," said the marshal; "I have been doing my best, but the way this town is crowded up with a lot of riotous people I am kept busy enforcing order night and day. Young man, if you are ever offered the office of marshal in the West here, turn it down hard."

"I don't suppose that there is much danger of anyone offering it to me," said Ted; "but what has happened?"

"That man Dolan that we arrested on a charge of attempted murder has escaped from one of my deputies. There's no finding him now. This town is a jam of all sorts of people, and we might as well hunt for a needle in a haystack."

"How about the money that he had?" asked Ted, quickly. "He should have had about eight hundred dollars about him that belonged to Jack Malone, the cowboy, from whom he won it, and whom he left drugged in his room in the hotel. Why did he drug Malone, anyway?"

"He won part of that money," said Lumpkin, "but he robbed Malone of part of it. He drugged him in his room there, and had gone through his pockets and intended leaving town that night. It was a lucky thing that your friend happened into that room and found Malone there. But the money was safe. I have it in my pocket now."

"I wonder why he didn't depend on his play to win the rest of it?" said Ted. "I should think that would be a good deal safer way of robbing a man than drugging him and picking his pockets. It's just as mean, of course, and just as criminal, but I should think it would appeal more to men who have a great dislike for endangering themselves."

"I suppose it would," said the marshal, "but I have been talking with Malone, and I find that his game didn't work as well as he expected. He got Malone drunk at last and induced him to play. Malone lost about two hundred and then sobered up."

"And wouldn't play any more?"

"Yes, that is what surprises me about Malone. I thought he was a pretty worthless chap, but it seems that he has a great deal more backbone in him and more squareness than I have ever given him credit for. When he came to his senses he was sorry for what he had done, for he knew that the money belonged to his girl, Rose Casey, and, biggest wonder of all, he didn't try to square himself by winning the money back that he had lost. That's what Dolan and fellows like him calculate on, and they generally get away with all a man has about him before they let him go. But this Malone had backbone enough to bite it off then and there. He said the money wasn't his to gamble and asked for part of it back. He and Dolan got into a scrap about it. He claimed that Dolan took advantage of him when he was drunk, as no doubt he did. Being a cowboy, he wanted to settle the argument with pistols, but Dolan couldn't see it that way. He offered to compromise and took Malone up to his room on that pretext. Then he jumped on him with some chloroform. He hit him over the head with a butt of a revolver, from behind first, and then he used the dope. He did it when Malone was off his guard, or he never would have succeeded, for Malone is a husky young fellow and more than a match for two rum-soaked gamblers like Dolan."

"Where is Malone now?" asked Ted. "You haven't given him back the money, have you?"

"Not on your life."

"Where is he? Has he left the room in the place where the doctor took him for treatment after we brought him around a little?"

"Yes, he left there this morning, apparently all right."

"And where is Rose Casey?"

"Out on the prairie somewhere on an old cayuse her father gave her. She's out in the rush for a homestead and she'll get there if it's possible. She was plumb knocked out when she thort her beau had gambled away all her money, but she's got pluck, thet girl hes. She said as how she was goin' ter get a farm fer herself ef she could, an' she's out there among a lot of the toughest men waitin' fer the startin' gun ter be fired. I saw her. She hed an ole pistol in her hand an' I told her to hang onter it. I can't be all over ter keep ther law, an' it's going to be an awful rush for the desirable sites. It takes a mighty plucky little girl to go into a thing like that."

"You bet it does," said Ted; "that girl has the right stuff in her and the right spirit. Did you turn the money over to her?"

"I offered it to her and she said she wouldn't take it. She took it once and she wants you to keep it now. Anyway, it's no place to carry much money around with you out there with that gang of land boomers."

"When does the rush start?" asked Ted.

"Nine o'clock in the morning."

Ted glanced at the gun metal watch which he carried.

"I am going out there," he said. "I can't make any claim for myself, but I am going to see it. It's seven now, and there's no time to lose. The line must be fifteen miles away."

Kit appeared among the throng at that moment.

"Are you coming out to see this land boom?" he asked. "The horses are all saddled up, and we are all of us going out to see the rush for a homestead. Are you coming?"

"I am," said Ted, rising quickly. "So long, marshal."

"But here, are you not going to take this eight hundred? I don't want to see it go a-begging. I never saw money such a drug on the market before."

"Hang on to it, marshal, till Rose Casey comes for it and claims it. I think that she needs it more than I do, and she is entitled to it. You are the proper party to hold on to it till it's claimed by the owner. You can leave it here in the hotel safe."

Ted was off a minute later, leaving the marshal staring after him.

Out in front of the hotel were the horses of the young rough riders. Bud was holding the lines of several of them, and the other boys were standing on the porch waiting for Ted.

A big crowd of people were gathered, watching them. They had often heard of Ted Strong's young rough riders and their exploits on the Black Mountain Ranch, as well as some of their doings in Texas, and they were anxious to see them together in a body.

"Come on, Teddie," said Carl Schwartz, "we iss waiting vor you. All apoard for der land poom! Hurrah vor me! I am der hottest papy in der punch!"

"I am a complete nervous wreck," said Beanpole, "and this suspense of waiting for Ted is undermining my constitution more and more."

"I had rather wait here where a fellow can have a quiet smoke than hustle about in the hot sun," said Ben Tremont.

"Back to der voods!" said Carl. "You iss too much laziness. Prace up, Ben, olt poy, unt py unt py you may pe a scrapper like me."

"As Shakespeare says," started Bob Martin, "'It is better——'"

He never completed his remark, for Kit Summers interrupted him with an impatient call to get on the back of his horse.

"We are late as it is," said Kit: "get on your horses, boys."

"Jumpin' sandhills!" said Bud Morgan, as he struggled with a stubborn horse that wanted to bolt; "wait till ther captain gives ther word. Don't yer see all ther people lookin' at ye? Do it all military an' proper, and show them that the young rough riders is the real article."

"All right, boys," called out Ted; "prepare to mount."

As if actuated by the same impulse, the young rough riders leaped from the porch at once. Each boy sta-

tioned himself on the near side of his horse, his left hand holding the reins and resting on the pommel of the saddle, his right twisted in the mane of the horse.

"All ready!" called Ted, going to the side of his own horse and taking a similar position.

Each foot went home in the stirrup and the boys stood in a regular line, each one with his eyes fixed on the form of his leader.

"Mount!"

Seven khaki-clad forms shot up into the air, seven sturdy limbs were thrown over the backs of the horses and down into the stirrup leathers on the off side with a resounding smack.

"Form!"

The horses seemed to act without the slightest guidance from their leaders, and the next moment the young rough riders were drawn out in column of two.

"Forward, march!"

Away they went down the street at a spanking trot, out toward the open prairie, every boy sitting erect and close to the saddle like a true plainsman, and every horse under complete control.

It was a sight worth seeing, and the crowd about the front of the hotel appreciated it. The people along the streets made way for them, and many of them waved their hats.

"Three cheers for the young rough riders!"

It was Lumpkin, formerly the friend of Rossiter and Tuttle, and the enemy of Ted Strong, who proposed the cheers. And he stepped out in plain view on the hotel porch and led the cheering.

The cheers were given with a hearty good will, and with this expression of approval ringing in their ears the boys let their horses out into a gallop and sped out free and far on the open, breezy prairie.

CHAPTER VIII.

WAITING FOR THE STARTING GUN.

It was a matter of fifteen miles or so to the new lands which were to be opened to the homesteaders that morning, and the boys knew that they would have to let their horses go it at a pretty good pace to make it in time. It was seven o'clock now, and they would have to be there a little after nine o'clock if they wanted to see the sport. Ted Strong, riding a little in advance of the others, with Kit Summers at his side, explained that it was not only curiosity that had led him to wait over in Ceriso for the opening of these new lands.

"I am rather anxious about that girl, Rose Casey," he explained; "she put us on to the fact that Rossiter and Tuttle were laying a game to corral and run away with a thousand steers, and if it had not been for her we would certainly have been charged with the theft, and we would probably be still languishing in jail, waiting for a trial. It's going to be an awful tough fight to get a good site in this new land, and although there are plenty of men there, no doubt, who have chivalry and would like to help a girl, she may get into serious trouble, for the crowd that attends a thing of this kind is not usually very orderly in its behavior. I admire her pluck and I want to see her win out. That is why I thought it a good idea to have the whole gang of the young rough riders out there to keep an eye out for her. When we are all out together like this we make a pretty decent front, I imagine, and people are not any too likely to tread on our corns or to molest our friends, either."

"People about here think that we are the real stuff," said Kit: "some one got into Ceriso from up South Dakota way the other night, I believe, and it seemed that he knew all about us, and how we ran the Black Mountain Ranch and put a finish on the work of Roaring Bill."*

"We'd better get a shake on us," growled Ben Tremont from behind them: "these horses are feeling lively, and as we are in a hurry, there is no use holding them in."

"Let them out, then," said Ted, "full speed, everybody!"

"Come on, poys," squealed Carl Schwartz, "let us haf id on der run. Ged a mofe on. Look oudt vor me. I iss der greatest oof der joung rough riters unt I made a fight py mineselluf unt mate a prisoner oof him."

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*See YOUNG ROUGH RIDERS WEEKLY, No. 6.

Carl's horse got beyond his control at this moment and went scampering away ahead of the others in a mad rush across the prairie. Carl gave up pulling on the lines and clung frantically to the back of the steed, calling wildly for help. The others let out after him, and the young rough riders, instead of being in orderly column as they had been a few minutes before, were now pelting along pell-mell, every man riding for himself and urging his horse to do the best it knew how, and Carl on his runaway far in the lead.

Kit and Bud Morgan were mounted on unusually fast horses, and they soon began to draw away from the other boys and up alongside of Carl. With their help the German youth managed to get his steed into some kind of order and to get the bit back from between his teeth. They were up on a rise on the prairie and they could see far in advance of them a great concourse of people stretched out across the level plain.

As they drew nearer they could hear the hubbub caused by the presence of so great a crowd, and see that there were all sorts and conditions of men assembled there. Some of them were fine-looking, clean-shaven young fellows, who looked as though they might have been college boys. Others were typical Westerners, sunburned, with big hats and long mustachios. Some looked like broken-down wrecks, hoping to retrieve something of the time they had lost through life by getting a good claim for nothing, while others were young fellows, scarcely more than boys, anxious to make a good start in life for themselves by becoming property owners.

As the young rough riders rode slowly forward among the groups of people that crowded the prairie they attracted considerable attention. Many of the people took them for government officers, as they were all dressed alike in khaki suits.

They soon found themselves in the midst of an incongruous group of people, some on horse and some on foot. Many of them gazed longingly at the horses which the boys rode.

"Them fellers orter come out purty near first in ther race," said one long-bearded man who was mounted astride a raw-boned little cayuse.

"They got pretty good horseflesh there," said another man, in a hoarse, husky voice.

Ted wheeled around to look at this fellow and saw that he was a countryman in blue jeans and decorated with a large pair of red whiskers.

He cast his eyes about in every direction, but could see nothing of Rose Casey, the girl he was looking for.

In a long line, all across the prairie, standing ten or fifteen feet apart, were United States soldiers in Uncle Sam's familiar blue and gold uniform. They carried their rifles at the port and faced the crowd of prospective settlers, keeping them back from the new country until the signal should be given to allow them to enter it.

The people who were about to rush into this hitherto forbidden territory were kept back by this line of military, and whenever there was one of them who attempted to edge forward too far he was promptly pushed back with the butt of an army rifle.

The boys who saw this sight marveled at the orderliness and system which a few United States soldiers were able to enforce in such a crowd.

It was very near nine o'clock, and it was expected that the pistol shot that was to mark the opening of the rush for a homestead might be fired at any moment. Those who had buggies, or phaetons, or buckboards, climbed into them and drew the reins up in their hands. Those who had horses or mules climbed to their backs. Ted thought as he glanced around that he had never seen such a collection of animals or of wagons in his life. There were old worn-out army mules, with bits of sacking thrown across their backs instead of saddles, there were dilapidated-looking buckboards and phaetons that might have come through the war. Here and there was a plainsman mounted on a fairly good horse. On every face there was the same expression—a look of eager expectancy and strain; every eye was turned toward the point where stood the officer who was to fire the signal shot.

Ted looked up and down the long line, trying in vain to see the figure of the girl he was looking for. He noticed several faces in the crowd before him that he

recognized as belonging to rather tough, nondescript characters whom he had seen lounging about Ceriso during his stay there. He also noticed that in the first line, seated in a neat-looking buckboard, was the red-whiskered countryman whose hoarse and husky voice had attracted his attention a moment before. This fellow had managed to edge his conveyance to the very front of the line. Indeed, he had crossed it under pretext of being unable to hold in his horse, but that pretext did not go with the blue-coated soldiers. He was ordered sternly to get back into line, and when he did not do so quickly enough, one of the soldiers seized the reins and backed his horse into position again.

The countryman with the red whiskers cursed and swore volubly, but the soldiers paid no more attention to this than if they had been so many automatons. They were there to enforce the rules, and that was all that they paid any attention to.

"Vere iss der gerl?" asked Carl. "She will be sorry oof she don'd see me."

"See you!" said Bud Morgan. "Jumpin' sandhills! what would she want ter see you for? It's me she would like ter see. I'm the champeen lady-killer of this here outfit. Jest look at me. Ain't I a peach?"

"Yaw," said Carl, "you iss a beach, I don'd think."

Kit Summers came riding up among the people at that moment.

"Seen any signs of her?" asked Ted.

"She's not down in that direction. Let's go up toward the other end of the line. She must be somewhere up toward this end of the line. Come along, boys."

Ted pulled his horse back of the crowd so that they could ride along with less trouble, and the young rough riders, bunched together in a body, started to walk their horses up to the other end of the long starting line.

As they did so they noticed that the countryman in the jeans, driving a buckboard, had pulled his animal away back out of the front line and was turning it about. Kit pointed toward him.

"I wonder what is the matter with that fellow," he said; "he had a dandy position down in front of the line there. I noticed him because of his red whiskers."

"His position was a trifle too good, I guess," said Ben Tremont; "he was in too big a hurry and he backed right in among the first fellows there and then let his horse take him across the starting line."

"Yes," said Bud Morgan; "I saw his little maneuver and so did one of ther swatties who's a-keepin' order. He grabbed his reins and shoved him back into place."

"I might have stayed there where he was, though," said Kit.

"I guess he got madt mit himselluf," said Carl Schwartz.

"As Shakespeare says: 'There may be some trace of madness in his blood,'" said Bob Martin.

"A lot of good it will do him getting mad," said Kit; "look at him go now. He seems to be in a hurry. And look at those other fellows in the buggy with him."

Two other men had leaped into the buckboard beside the red-whiskered man. They were hard-featured fellows and looked about as tough as anyone in the crowd. There seemed to be some arrangement between the three already understood, for not one of them spoke a word, and the red-whiskered man whipped up his horses and drove off at a rapid rate in the same direction as that taken by the young rough riders.

Suddenly Kit rose in his stirrups and pointed forward.

"There she is!" he cried. The boys looked and saw Rose Casey, mounted on a bony horse, in the front of the line, with a revolver held in one hand. She looked really beautiful, for her cheeks were flushed and her eyes sparkling with excitement.

At the same moment a hum of excitement ran along the line, a sharp revolver shot sounded out and a wild yell arose from the people. The rush for a homestead had commenced.

CHAPTER IX.

AN EXCITING HALF HOUR.

At the shot of the pistol, which proclaimed the fact that the lands which hitherto had been the property of Indians were now laid open for settlers, there was a

chorus of yells and shouts upraised such as has seldom been heard anywhere. In this new stretch of country there were many spots which were esteemed especially desirable for settlers, which might turn out to be corner lots in the city which was to be founded there, and which might make their lucky owners rich men in a night. There were many other locations which were not at all desirable and which settlers might think scarcely worth the claiming, for much of the land was desert or covered with scrub oak, and useless either for ranching or farming. The prospective settlers were fully alive to this fact, and they had been drawn up along the starting line, with every muscle tense and every thought concentrated on getting a good start in the rush, like so many sprinters at the start of a race. This was a race in which wealth was to be the prize, which was to extend miles across the country, and in which thousands of contestants had entered. You have noticed the excitement that an ordinary foot race calls forth, and you may imagine, better than we can describe it, the excitement and confusion that broke loose when the revolver shot announcing the opening of this new country sounded out on the air.

Ted Strong and his young rough riders had been scattered along in a line through the crowd of people. Just a moment before the crack of the revolver Ted had caught sight of Rose Casey. He had wheeled his horse in her direction when the rush started. For a moment there was a terrible press and confusion. It looked to Ted as though his horse was going to be swept from its feet. The young rough rider saw at a glance that it was useless to attempt to breast that tide of humanity, and that any such attempt would probably result in his being thrown from his horse and trampled under foot.

The wild screams and yells of the people rang in his ears as he wheeled his horse about again so that he could go on with the rush. A buckboard with two horses hitched to it dashed directly toward him, and it seemed for a second that the horse he rode was to be impaled on one of its shafts. Ted, however, gave it pressure with the knee and bridle at the same time, and the little cow pony, reined back on its haunches, swung around as if turning on an axis.

The buckboard shot past him, the man sitting in it swearing at Ted for hindering his course and lashing away at his horses at the same time.

The next instant a heavy man, mounted on a heavy horse, charged past. The shoulder of his horse caught Ted's leg and nearly sent him out of the saddle. His own pony went staggering off only to be bunted into by another horseman, who was charging wildly along on the other side of him. For a moment the little horse reeled and staggered, but it soon got its feet again, and Ted was charging madly along in the rush of people who were intent on placing a claim.

Ted had no thought of entering this real estate boom himself. To claim a homestead honestly the young rough rider would have had to live for a while on it, and Ted was in no position to do that. He did not know where the rest of the young rough riders were, for the sudden start of this rush had separated them.

"Well!" muttered Ted, as his horse, wildly excited by the other maddened animals about it, dashed madly forward, "I have got into this land rush without wanting to, and I cannot get out of it just at present. I've been in a cattle stampede more than once, but I must say that this is just about as exciting as any stampede, only it is human beings who are stampeding now, and they are just as excited and just as crazy as cattle ever are."

On every side of the young rough rider were crowds of people, some mounted and some in carriages, all tearing madly along in the same direction, and none of them paying the slightest attention either to safety or proper treatment for the animals they drove.

Ted had caught one fleeting glimpse of Rose Casey, and now he looked eagerly in every direction to see if he would find her again. It seemed like finding a needle in a haystack in that rushing concourse. Ted's eyes were sharp, and all at once he saw far before him the white of the shirt waist that the girl wore and the flutter of the black hair which had come partly undone, and was now fluttering wildly on the breeze as the intrepid girl dashed along.

"Good boy, Rose; you're all right!" exclaimed Ted.

He could see that the girl was in the very forefront of the rush, that she was riding well and easily, and that she had one of the best positions on the line. If nothing happened to her horse and she was able to hold up her speed, there was every likelihood of her obtaining one of the best sites in the whole of the new territory. There might be some possibility of some one attempting to drive her away from it, once she had seized it, for in that mad concourse law and order would be thrown to the wind as well as all sense of chivalry!

But Rose seemed to be prepared to fight to the death anyone who opposed her. Her rough and harsh life had planted in her nature a good deal of sternness and courage that is not found in the ordinary girl. It showed in her face now. Her jaw was set hard and her eyes were gleaming bright; she rode the great horse she was mounted on as though she had been bred to the saddle. In her hand was a gleaming revolver, and one look at the stern face and bright eyes of the girl would have told that she was prepared to use it against anyone who stood in her way.

A sudden thrill of admiration came through Ted's heart as he looked at her riding madly forward at the very crest of this human wave. He had never seen a girl who looked like that before, and one glance at her face seemed to arouse the fighting blood in his nature. A sudden longing came over him to ride forward to her side and dash along with her.

He chirped to his horse and gave it the spurs. It answered gallantly, but it was no easy thing to thread a way forward through that crush of people.

For a moment Ted raced neck and neck with a cowboy on a calico pony. The cowboy was riding as only a cowboy can, lashing wildly at his pony with his quirt and digging savagely into its bleeding sides with his cruel spurs.

"Git outer my way, ye dude!" he screamed, striking at Ted with his lash.

Ted avoided the blow, but did not attempt to return it. He bent over the neck of his own horse and half rose in his stirrups so as to get every ounce of strength and speed that there was in the animal. For a moment it was neck and neck between Ted and the cowboy, and, then Ted began to draw ahead.

The cowboy was forced to pull in behind him, and then two buckboards that raced in between, with their horses stretched out, on a dead run, and their drivers yelling like madmen, cut him off so that Ted saw no more of him.

He glanced around to see if he could catch any glimpse of Rose Casey now, but she was gone. She had passed ahead, farther over to one side, and Ted guided his horse in that direction as well as he could.

The press was still thick, although already people were beginning to string out to lay their claims. The most desirable stretch of country was still ahead, and the more reckless spirits were urging their steeds madly forward. The excitement of this rush brought yells from everyone, and the noise of shouting, together with the thunder of hoofs, and rumble and rattle of wildly bouncing wagons, made the place seem like bedlam.

"Git out of ther way or I'll shoot ye!"

"Pull over ter ther right or I'll run ye down!"

"Clear outer here! I got the right of way in this direction!"

These were the yells that Ted heard on all sides of him. But he paid no attention to them. The thrill that the beauty and courage of Rose Casey had sent through his blood was still strong in him, and his every thought was to find her and help her in her brave struggle to make a home for herself.

Behind Ted came a middle-aged man, standing bolt upright in his buckboard and lashing at his horses like a fiend. It seemed at every toss of the pitching vehicle that he would be thrown out to be tramped under foot, but he kept his footing wonderfully.

His eyes were blazing with the madness of the race, and his splendid horses, covered with a lather of foam, were dashing forward as though they were on a race track.

Ted glanced once behind and saw what was coming after him.

"Pull out to one side, or I'll run a shaft through

you!" screamed the man in the buckboard. Ted glanced to one side and saw that if he pulled out he would be pocketed behind another wagon and would lose considerable of the ground he had gained.

He neither looked at the man nor answered him.

"Pull out yourself," he muttered, as he leaned further forward over the neck of his horse; "I wouldn't pull out for ten like you!"

But Ted found that there was little more speed in his horse. It had been ridden the day before, and though it did its best it could not spurt again. The rumble of the wheels of the buckboard sounded louder and louder in his ears.

"Git out of the way, you fool!" yelled the man who was driving. "You'll get killed if you stay. I'm in this race to win and I won't stop for nobody!"

"I have the right of way," said Ted; "pull out to one side and pass me if you can. You have a right to do that."

The man swore and lashed his horses forward.

"Get back there!" said Ted, half facing around in his saddle. "I've got a gun here, and if you try to rush me I'll use it."

For a moment the man hesitated and then he started to pull in his horses. The sight of Ted's determined face had decided the question for him. But he started to pull in a little too late. His animals had the bits between their teeth and they were maddened with the noise and the excitement. They bolted when the man pulled in, and nearly threw him out of his wagon. Ted saw them coming and knew that there was nothing for it but to get out of the way. He spun around hard to the right and his horse stumbled.

Whizz! came the buckboard, and the long shaft grazed Ted's back. A moment later the near horse had charged directly into him. His own pony staggered and struggled badly to regain its footing, but it was weak and it fell. Head over heels, Ted rolled out of the saddle, and the buckboard flew directly over him. The gleaming hoofs of the horses missed him and a moment later the rush had swept past him, and he was lying stunned and half conscious on the prairie.

CHAPTER X.

JACK MALONE'S JEALOUSY.

For a moment Ted was only half conscious of what had happened. He saw the glittering horseshoes flash past his face, he saw a thousand stars dancing before his eyes, his head felt as though it were split open and he knew that he was rolling over and over in the dust and mud into which the prairie had been trampled by the rush of horses.

Then he lay still on his back, and as he lay there in a half daze he heard the rumble that had been sounding in his ears, the rush of men and the clamor of horses roll further and further away.

He sat up and looked about him. His pony had recovered its feet and managed to avoid the rush that had passed over Ted. It was standing a little way off, trembling, in a terrible lather of sweat, and with a bleeding scratch along its side where the shaft of the buckboard had hit it as it swung past.

Ted looked around in the other direction. He could see a wild mob of people racing over the brow of a hill before him and he knew that the site of what was expected to be a new and flourishing city lay on the other side, where there was also a water course. Around him the plain had been torn up by a thousand hoofs and cut into by hundreds of wheels, but it was bare and deserted. It seemed as if the howling crowd of excited men whom he had been riding with for the past few moments had been phantoms and had been swept away by the hand of some magician. It seemed to the young rough rider, as, still stunned by his fall, he rose unsteadily to his feet, that the whole rush that had taken place had been nothing but some wild dream; the silence had come so suddenly after the deafening clamor, that Ted's ears were still ringing with the noise.

The young rough rider laughed and rubbed his head.

"I guess it was reality all right," he said, with a smile; "there's my horse, and I'll warrant it never had a faster ride than that in its life. I've had quite a tumble myself, but luckily there are no bones broken—hullo! what's that?"

From somewhere over on his right he had heard a

sharp, clear crack, unmistakably the sound of a revolver. Ted turned and looked. Not fifty yards away there was a clump of trees enclosing a slight depression in the prairie in which there was a small spring.

There was a noise of scuffling and of angry voices from among the trees.

"Some more excitement there," he muttered; "I guess I'll butt in. I might as well see all that there's to be seen."

He ran his hand along his belt and found that his revolver was still in place. Then he dashed forward toward the clump of trees on foot, for his horse was in no condition to be ridden much now, and the distance was short.

A moment later he burst through the trees and came upon a sight that brought his hand around to the butt of his revolver in an instant.

Rose Casey was standing directly opposite to him in front of the pool which was always there because of the spring that flowed up into it. Her big white horse was stretched out on the ground a little distance off, and a black hole in its temple, and the blood stain on the earth beside it showed that it had been shot.

Rose held her revolver still in her hand, and she had evidently just fired it, for one of the three men who were facing her was crying out with pain and nursing his right hand, from which the blood was dripping. Ted had seen all three of the men before.

One of them was the fellow with red whiskers and blue jeans, who had been riding in the buckboard, and the other two were tough-looking characters whom he had seen join him in his vehicle.

The buckboard itself was hitched a little distance off.

No one had seen Ted, and he remained hidden behind one of the trees, watching the scene before him in silence. His hand had grasped his revolver, however, and it was now leaning over his crooked elbow, cocked.

For a moment the three men stood facing the girl. Then the one with the red whiskers spoke. Ted had heard his voice before that day and thought that there was something familiar about it. Now he recognized it and knew whose it was. His face grew a trifle sterner, but he still maintained his position behind one of the trees from which he could see all that was going on without being seen himself.

"We've got you cornered," said the man with the red whiskers; "there's no use you puttin' up a fight. We don't want to hurt you, but we've gone too far now and you might as well give in."

"I won't give in!" said Rose Casey in a ringing voice. "I won't stand here and be robbed and insulted by you fellows! I don't know who you are, and I don't know what you want with me!"

"We told yer to pull to," said the red-whiskered man.

"Yes, and shot my horse when I refused."

"Well, suppose we did; we wants our commands ter be obeyed."

"What do you want with me? I have not anything that will make it worth your while robbing me."

"You have a thousand dollars. I know it was returned to you by the marshal."

"It wasn't returned to me. You couldn't have it, anyway."

"Wasn't it? Couldn't I? Do you think I've hired these fellers and follered you all this distance fer nothing? I am wise to the fact that ye have that money and I'm going to get it."

"You won't get it."

While this talk was going on one of the three ruffians had stolen around to one side of the girl. Now he rushed at her. She screamed and fired, but her bullet went wild over his head, and the next instant he had caught her by the right wrist. Rose struck him heavily in the face with her left fist, and the blow was so unexpected from a girl that he staggered back. At the same instant she twisted her hand free and struck

him over the head a crashing blow with the butt of the revolver.

The man with the red whiskers had darted forward at the same time and was just about to seize the desperate girl when something hit him over the head.

It was Ted's weapon, and he went to the ground, stunned and bleeding.

The third ruffian, the one who had been wounded in the hand, gave a wild scream of dismay when he saw Ted spring upon the scene. He dashed for the buckboard, and a moment later was driving madly away in it.

Rose Casey turned upon Ted and looked at him. Ted could see her face pale and flush. He could see a light of surprise in her eyes, and a look that was more than surprise.

"What! You!" she said.

The weapon dropped from her hands and she staggered toward him. All the hardness and fire that Ted had noted in her face before were gone, it was soft and melting now, her eyes had a happy, gentle light in them and her lips smiled as she swayed to and fro hardly able to keep her feet. Ted caught her in his arms. A sudden burst of pity and regard for this girl, against whom had been such terrible odds, and who had fought so bravely and pluckily, filled his heart, and he drew her close to him without thinking what he was doing.

He remembered the sudden glad look in her eyes, however, when she had first seen him, and he was frightened at it. He held her still for a moment until she had recovered her strength somewhat and then stepped away from her.

Evidently some subtle feminine intuition had told her something of what had been passing through Ted's mind. When she raised her head her face was flushed, her eyes had hardened again and there was a firm line of determination in the set of her mouth.

"I'm all right now," she said; "I was a little dizzy when I first saw you. I don't know what I was doing. Did I say anything? I must have been silly. I was so scared that I don't remember what I did."

"No you didn't say anything," said Ted. He turned his eyes away from her, as he saw that she was confused and anxious to avoid his gaze, and bent over to the two prostrate forms that lay near by on the ground.

Both men were still unconscious as Ted glanced at them. The red-whiskered man lay nearest him. Ted reached over and found what he expected to find—that the whiskers came away in his hand and that beneath them were the features of "Honest" Jim Dolan, the gambler and blackleg.

Ted could see through the plot now. Dolan had heard that the money had been returned to Rose Casey, and, disguising himself, he had planned to rob her in the land rush. The girl's pluck, and Ted's happening to be there at the right moment, had brought about his downfall.

Ted bound the prisoners, and saw two horsemen, whom he recognized as Bud Morgan and Kit Summers, approaching.

Rose was standing a little distance off, and there was a frightened look in her eyes. She was looking past Ted, and Ted glanced around, too. Behind him stood Jack Malone, the cowboy, who was engaged to marry Rose.

"Hullo," said Ted.

The cowboy glared at him.

"I come here in time," he said; "I wondered why you was so good ter me an' Rose, givin' Rose her money an' then runnin' down thet gambler."

"What do you mean?" said Ted. "Are you crazy?"

"I mean that I saw what just happened. I saw Rose in your arms an' lookin' at yer in a way she hes no right ter look at anyone."

"Silence!" said Rose herself; "how dare you speak that way!"

Malone glanced at her, and Ted could see that his sunburned face was twisted with the mental agony and bitterness he was suffering.

"You're a fool," he said; "this feller is jest a-playin' with yer. He hes made yer the way ye are 'bout him so's he can go an' laugh at yer an' tell his swell friends how my gal Rose is in lo——"

It was Ted who interrupted Malone this time. He had listened long enough. He laid a heavy hand on the cowboy's shoulder and nearly threw him from his feet.

"Look here," he said; "you are either a cur or crazy. Did this girl ever deceive you? Didn't she sacrifice her everything for you? Didn't she give you the money she received as a reward for the capture of those rustlers? Have you no gratitude? After what that girl has done for you, you should fall down on your knees and worship her. Two of the young rough riders are coming up now, and if we hear another word from you we'll toss you in a blanket and ride you on a rail."

For a moment there was a dead silence. Jack Malone stared steadily at the young rough rider, and as he looked two tears came into his eyes and rolled down his furrowed, sunburned cheeks.

The words that Ted had uttered had been sinking into his heart and brain.

"Young feller," he said, "I ain't afraid of yer threats. But I guess as how what you said was true. I oughtn't ever ter believe no wrong of Rose—not after what she has done fer a no-account feller like me. But I'm jealous, pard; I'm plumb crazy about ther gal. I wanter start in to prove now ther is some good in me. Pard, I take it back; I was crazy with jealousy. I know ye fer a white man and I know ye talk straight talk. Will you shake hands with me?"

Ted grasped the hand of the cowboy in a hearty pressure. Malone then turned to Rose.

"Rose," he said in a trembling voice, "I know thet I ain't worth ye. But I'll do my best. Do ye still feel the same?"

"Dear old Jack!" said the girl; and as Ted walked away toward his companions he was glad, indeed, in his heart that he had not yielded to the momentary admiration he had felt for the girl, for he knew that he had made two lives happy where he might have made both miserable.

THE END.

Next Week's Issue (No. 23) Will Contain

Ted Strong's Indian Trap

OR,

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An Apache Uprising!

The Young Rough Riders at the Front!

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